

# Rethinking Teacher Certification to Employ K-12 Adjunct Teachers

By Keri D. Ingraham

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## Key Points

- Current teacher certification laws create a rigid and deficient process for selecting and employing teachers.
- Reforming teacher certification laws would provide districts with more flexibility in how they hire teachers, including employing adjunct teachers for K-12 classrooms.
- Employing adjunct teachers would allow professionals to bring their valuable content-area knowledge and direct field experience to the classroom as contractors who teach subjects in which they specialize.

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Our public schools are in a crisis. Despite investing more money in K-12 education than most other countries (nearly \$15,000 per student annually), educational performance levels are stagnant.<sup>1</sup> The US pitifully ranks 26th of 65 developed nations for K-12 student learning and continues to slip further behind, most recently evidenced by math scores dropping from 31st to 33rd place.<sup>2</sup> By majority, public school students even fail to achieve basic proficiency levels in core subjects.<sup>3</sup>

One source of the problem is a rigid and deficient process for selecting and employing teachers. Teacher certification laws, intended to ensure good teachers lead our classrooms, instead frequently keep highly qualified individuals out of the profession. And the COVID-19 pandemic will likely further exacerbate the preexisting teacher shortage.<sup>4</sup>

The crisis demands a new approach to hiring teachers: It's time for K-12 public education to modify teacher certification laws to follow the example of colleges and universities in leveraging the advantages of adjunct teachers.

## What Is an Adjunct Teacher?

Trends in higher education tend to trickle down to K-12 schools over time. In recent years, these trends have largely centered on technology use. For example, following higher education's footsteps, secondary and even primary schools have implemented the use of online plagiarism checking systems, online testing for autograding, and online learning management systems to provide students with course learning material. However, the higher education strategy of employing adjunct faculty has not yet transpired in K-12 classrooms other than in rare cases.

In the K-12 setting, adjunct teachers could be hired as contractors, typically part-time, to fill teaching needs. As is the case in higher education, adjunct teachers would be assigned to teach courses and work with students for subjects in which they specialize. However, they would be exempt from some other responsibilities, such as decorating the classroom, ordering supplies, and participating in

the full schedule of student-monitoring duties such as in the lunchroom or bus lot.

While some adjunct teachers may teach several classes a day, others may simply teach either one class period at the secondary level or one subject at the primary level—whether for one or multiple homeroom classes. Therefore, compensation would be based on the number and type of assigned classes.

## The Benefits of Adjunct Teachers

Employing adjunct teachers has multiple advantages. First, since adjunct teachers are not permanent employees, staffing levels can be easily adjusted with changing enrollment numbers, which is a crucial need in the COVID-19 era. During the 2020–21 school year, K–12 public schools nationwide lost over one and a half million students (more than a 3 percent decrease from the prior school year).<sup>5</sup> If school districts had adjunct teachers, they could easily increase or decrease school staffing as the year demanded since they are independent contractors instead of tenured teachers, whose unions tightly regulate employment protection.

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Second, the candidate pool of subject matter experts would widen since adjunct teachers could teach part-time while remaining in their current profession. Artists, businesspeople, computer programmers, historians, mathematicians, musicians, scientists, translators, and writers are a small sample of the types of professionals who could bring valuable content-area knowledge and direct field experience to the classroom.

Third, adjunct teachers could especially meet the need for highly qualified upper-level math and science teachers and even special education—positions that school districts typically find difficult to fill due to fewer applicants.

Finally, adjunct teachers are cheaper to employ because school districts do not have to pay expensive full-time employee benefits to these part-time, nontenured teachers. Nor will school districts have to engage in lengthy and costly negotiations with unions to determine adjunct teachers' compensation.

## What Must Change to Implement an Adjunct Teacher Model

Unfortunately, rigid teacher certification laws currently prevent school districts from implementing this solution. While they are intended to ensure competent teachers lead our K–12 classrooms, teacher certification laws have not translated into teacher success in the classroom. Consequently, only 13 percent of principals and 7 percent of superintendents express confidence in certification.<sup>6</sup> And only 38 percent of classroom teachers who recently graduated from schools of education feel prepared for the profession.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to their ineffectiveness as a metric of expected performance, these laws block retired and midcareer switchers from entering classrooms without going back to college or navigating through a time-consuming, often complicated, alternative certification program. This represents a significant missed opportunity for students to gain from those subject matter experts and their associated life experiences.

Meanwhile, large pools of data exist from the private school, public charter school, and even traditional public school sectors that indicate noncertified teachers can produce excellent student learning results. Teach for America (TFA) provides a prime example. TFA selects top college graduates to fill teaching positions without requiring a teaching certificate. Even when placed in low-performing schools, students with TFA teachers consistently achieve substantial academic learning gains. For example, a two-year study looking at math scores involving 4,573 middle and high school students from throughout the US found that students taught by a TFA teacher performed better on end-of-year exams, equivalent to 2.6 months of additional schooling, than students with certified teachers did.<sup>8</sup>

By changing teacher certification laws, districts also would knock down the cost barrier for becoming

a teacher. Adjunct teachers would not incur the cost of tuition to obtain traditional certification from a college or pay expensive fees for an alternative certification program. Instead, adjunct teachers could use affordable online training courses offered through the private sector to feel confident in the basics of classroom teaching. School systems could also offset the costs of these courses with the money they save from not having to supply full-time employee benefits.

## Why Conservatives Should Champion Adjunct Teachers

Conservatives should champion modifying teacher certification laws to allow for adjunct teachers because it gives localities more control over schools, employs free-market principles, increases competition to improve teaching and student outcomes, and provides an avenue for breaking liberal teacher union power over public education.

Removing state teacher certification requirements would provide district leaders with greater local control to hire adjunct and full-time teachers who they judge will best serve their students and align with their enrollment numbers and staffing needs. It also increases competition in the marketplace by expanding the teacher talent pool.

Furthermore, allowing districts to hire adjunct teachers will weaken the monopoly unions have over teacher employment. Of course, powerful teacher unions will continue to fight for the self-interests of their adult members. They will argue, as they have for decades, that noncertified teachers aren't qualified to teach, despite the extensive student learning data that consistently prove otherwise. In reality, union leaders fear opening the profession to noncertified teachers will weaken their monopoly's stranglehold over K-12 public education.

## About the Author

**Keri D. Ingraham** is a fellow at Discovery Institute and the director of its American Center for Transforming Education.

## Limitations

Although allowing noncertified adjunct teachers would bring enormous benefits to many K-12 schools and classrooms, some limitations are worth noting. With younger students, caution should be used to ensure that adjunct teachers are employed with moderation. For example, a first-grade classroom would not necessarily be well suited to have several part-time teachers coming and going throughout the school day. Using only a few teachers in the younger grades for subjects such as art, music, and science offers continuity for students while providing the main teacher with a cross-subject assessment of the students' learning and development.

Additionally, a school comprised of primarily adjunct teachers would present stability concerns. Since adjunct teachers serve as independent contractors, they are less tied to the job when their contract ends. A large flux of adjunct teachers departing at the end of a semester or school year could put the school in a significant staffing bind. Again, adjunct teachers should be used in moderation to provide expertise and fill hiring gaps, not as the primary teaching team in a school.

## Concluding Thoughts

Instead of placing all bets on the currently flawed teacher certification process, the US K-12 education system would substantially benefit from employing free-market principles—such as increasing competition and allowing those closest to the students more authority to attract and hire excellent teachers. Great teachers are foundational to a quality education system, which benefits our nation's children and our country as a whole, and conservatives should champion policies like these that would improve the teaching profession.

## Notes

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